

nothing looks the same in the light by jadedpearl

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Genre: Love Confessions, M/M, Underage Smoking, about as much cursing as you'd expect from a fourteen year old though, and advice!, don't worry this is VERY g for general audiences, fourteen year olds are bad at feelings

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Summary:

Stan exhales through his nose, quick and exasperated. "Forget it," he says, opening his book again, but then he says, "I'm not saying he has to want to sleep with a woman, I'm just saying I don't think he's even interested in kissing a girl."

Something about the emphasis Stan places on "girl" knocks whatever Eddie was going to say out of Eddie's mouth. He opens his mouth, closes it, and then opens it again. "You think he likes boys?" Eddie says stupidly, still not really believing that they're still talking about the same Richie. Richie, with all the your mom jokes, and all the stupid shit about not being a virgin, and always asking "is she hot?".

Stan gives him another long, indecipherable look. "I think he likes someone," he says cryptically.

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It's not like Eddie *never* gets to leave his house, or like his mom is kind of *not chill* with him hanging out with any of his friends, especially after the shit that went down last summer. It's not like it's *hard enough* to make plans and then actually be able to keep them. And it's not like he and Richie planned to be at the Barrens *today*.

Except—wait—all those things *are* true—but when Eddie gets off his bike and climbs up into the clubhouse, there's no one there. No cigarette smoke curling through the afternoon sun cutting through the window; no rock music playing from the radio that isn't hung on the nail on the wall; no dog eared comics and pop-tart boxes spread out on the floor in some kind of tripping hazard.

No Richie, basically. Eddie hangs around for ten minutes just to make sure that Richie isn't late—it's been known to happen, but he usually shows up enthusiastically early to Loser hangouts, ready to ambush Eddie the moment he walks through the door. The fact that Richie isn't here to pinch Eddie's cheek or do one of his terrible Voices is as annoying as it is bewildering.

Eddie's pissed enough to collect his bike from the path leading down to the Barrens, get back on it, and furiously bike all the way to the Tozier's house. Richie's probably at home, reading comics or playing on his new GameBoy, having completely forgotten that Eddie's mom's cousin is sick a couple of towns over, and Eddie had narrowly avoided getting dragged along, leaving the entire day open for Unrestrained Summer Fun.

Maggie Tozier expresses some surprise that Eddie's at her house, but waves him up to Richie's room. Normally Eddie calls ahead, but what's more relevant is that he's been just short of explicitly banned from entering the Tozier residence by his mother, despite the fact that Richie's parents are perfectly normal, with a decent income and a double garage and a fully stocked medicine cabinet.

Eddie's pretty much ready to lay into Richie on sight, but when he opens the door to Richie's room, Richie is asleep in his bed, on top of his sheets, fully clothed. The situation is bizarre enough the Eddie

pauses. It's strange to see him this way, glasses askew on the pillow next to his head and mouth slightly agape. He looks too alive to look dead, for lack of better terms—the Hawaiian print of his shirt rising and falling gently, the pillow pressing careful red creases into the side of his face.

Normally Eddie would jostle him awake, roughly climb on top of him and demand that they read comics or go to the Barrens, or even ride bikes to the edge of town and watch trains go by while Richie smokes, which is what they do when they're *really* bored—but instead he sinks onto the desk chair opposite Richie, watching him for reasons he can't explain.

He's sitting there, brow furrowed, hands stiff in his lap, when Richie wakes up. Maybe it was the door opening, or just the presence of another body in the room, but he blinks blearily at Eddie before reaching for his glasses. Once they're on, whatever it was that had Eddie off his balance dissipates and he glares at Richie.

"Is this a vision?" Richie says groggily, his voice still thick with sleep. "My very own pocket sized guardian angel?"

"You were supposed to meet me at the Barrens, asshole," Eddie says, ignoring the jab and trying not to sound to hurt. It's fucking weird that Richie would skip hanging out to take a nap in the middle of the day, but Eddie doesn't see an explanation besides a casual indifference, which—stings, if he's being honest.

Richie's face falls a little bit. "My mom wouldn't let me," he says, sounding genuinely sorry. "I was all dressed and ready to go but she says I have to sleep until I get rid of this stupid fever. I wanted to call but...." He trails off, and the obvious goes unsaid: that Richie is not, under Any Circumstances, to call the Kaspbrak residence.

Eddie suddenly takes in the humidifier in the corner of the room, and the box of tissues and glass of orange juice on Richie's beside table. He feels a little ashamed on behalf of his membership in the hypochondriac's club, for not noticing the very obvious signs that this is clearly a Den of Sickness. He should probably leave, and soon, because if he actually does catch whatever Richie's got, his mom is going to freak.

But the most he does is lean back a little. “You never get sick,” he says stupidly, instead of making a hasty retreat down the stairs.

“I know,” Richie groans. “Must have caught something from your mom.”

“Glad to see you’ve retained your ‘sense of humor’, asshole,” Eddie says, glaring harder and making aggressive air quotes with his fingers. “Here’s hoping whatever gross virus you got licking flag poles wipes it out.”

“Just because I have glasses doesn’t make me the protagonist du jour in *A Christmas Story*,” Richie says, sounding only mildly irritated. “And what a state to leave me in—sweet and docile and completely unappetizing to Mrs. K? My ‘sense of humor’—” he weakly returns the air quotes “is ingrained in me and will never leave.”

This whole little speech is slightly undermined by the fact that he’s propped up against his two pillows like a Victorian woman dying of consumption.

Eddie shivers off thoughts of tuberculosis and the idea of a “sweet” and “docile” Richie. and says, “Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind the next time I don’t laugh at one of your shitty jokes,” eyes drifting around Richie’s room before realizing that before, when he noticed that Richie is fully clothed, it didn’t register that Richie is *actually fully clothed*.

“You seriously have your shoes on?” Eddie says incredulously. “Do you know what kind of dirt you can track into the house? It’s bad enough this place is fully carpeted—even your bathroom, which can I say, is unsanitary and fucking weird—but you do know that you’re basically tracking dog shit into your sheets, right?”

“Your mom tracks dog shit into my sheets,” Richie shoots back. “My feet aren’t even under the blankets. Also, not intentional, not that you asked—my mom gave me these fever reducers that knocked me out cold. I know I’m a man now—” Eddie snorts again at this, but Richie continues on like he didn’t hear anything “—but I’m pretty sure I shouldn’t be taking as much Tylenol as my dad. Shows what she knows.”

“Maybe you should be on them more often,” Eddie suggests. “It was so peaceful when you were sleeping.”

“If high dosages of over-the-counter medication have anywhere near the same effect on me that your birth control pills have on you, Dr. K, sign me up. Also—watching me sleep, Eds?” Richie winks, and Eddie shoots him A Look.

“Beep fucking beep. Are you going to take your shoes off or not?” Eddie asks, and then tacks on, “And don’t call me that,” more as a formality, and without any real heat behind it.

“If it bothers you so much, take them off yourself,” Richie says, waggling both his eyebrows and his feet, his Converse dancing at the end of the bed like Sesame Street characters.

Not one to back down from a Richie-Tozier-proposed-challenge, Eddie rolls his eyes and climbs onto the edge of the bed to start pulling at his laces. Richie props himself up on his elbows to watch, expression inscrutable and face red from fever. At first, he makes it difficult for Eddie, jerking his feet around, until Eddie gives him a look and he cuts it out. He manages to finally yank one of them off, almost bowling backwards. “It’s like I’m your fuckin’ babysitter,” he mumbles.

“Cutest babysitter I ever saw,” Richie says, his fluttering eyelashes magnified tenfold by the thick lens of his glasses. The result looks somewhat deranged. Eddie glares at him and holds up Richie’s shoe where clutched in his hand like a weapon, threateningly. Richie laughs but shrinks back the appropriate amount, holding his hands up. “Okay, okay,” he says, still grinning and a little breathless. “Just please take the other one off, Cinderella. No, wait—I’m Cinderella? Which would make you my prince—checks out.”

Eddie’s never been anyone’s prince, but he does take the shoe off, grumbling all the way, before eyeing the space next to Richie on the bed. He kind of wants to shuffle up there on his knees so that he can sit kneeling beside Richie, but thoughts of viral contamination cause him to reconsider, so he steps off the bed and goes back to the desk chair.

“So what are you going to do with the rest of the day?” Richie asks, scrabbling at the sheets and stuffing his pillows up against his headboard with one arm so that he can sit up and lean against them. “Seeing as I’m stuck here.”

Eddie shrugs. He had actually been looking forward to hanging out with Richie, but this development throws a wrench in those plans. “Don’t know. Maybe I’ll call Stan. I can’t stay here,” he adds, because it’s fairly obvious.

Disappointment flits across Richie’s face, and then, confusingly, relief. “Well, don’t let me keep you from your baby-love,” he simpers, and Eddie scrunches his face right back at him. “You can use our phone.”

“Uh-huh,” Eddie says, standing. He kind of expected Richie to rope him into staying, but Richie’s eyes are closed now, which means that he must be really out of it. Like one of those wind-up chattering teeth that go until they stop, abruptly, or launch themselves off of any elevated surface. Either way, Eddie’s just glad he didn’t have to a) get talked into staying here and risk catching a fever, or b) tell Richie no.

Richie’s mom is in the living room watching an afternoon talk show when Eddie pokes his head in and asks to use the phone. He’s got Stan’s number memorized, and Mrs. Uris picks up after two rings. When Stan gets on the line, he tells Eddie that he was about to head to the Barrens to do some bird-watching. Eddie has no interest in bird-watching, as it’s an activity that requires a lot of being quiet and sitting still (neither of these are his strong suit) but he knows that Ben and Bill are busy today, and Beverly is visiting her aunt in Portland—and even with the birds and the quiet, he still enjoys Stan’s company—so he agrees to meet him at the clubhouse in half an hour.

When Eddie treks back up the stairs to say goodbye to Richie, he finds that he’s changed out of his cut-offs and button down, and into sleep shorts and a loose t shirt. He’s left his socks on for whatever reason, and is still lying on top of the covers instead of beneath them. With fewer layers, it’s more apparent than normal how much he’s shot up in the past year, all knobby knees and sharp elbows.

“What did Stanley say,” Richie says, cracking one eye open. Eddie had been just about convinced that Richie had drifted off again, so he almost jumps at the sound of his voice. His glasses are next to his pillow, folded carefully, and his eyes look as jarringly normal-sized as they always do for the first minute after he takes them off.

“I’m heading over to the Barrens now,” Eddie says, feeling awkward now that Richie is well and truly vulnerable. His face feels kind of warm seeing Richie like this, with his dark curls crushed against his pillow. They stopped having regular sleepovers a couple of years ago, partly due to the fact that Sonia had tightened the reins more and more as Eddie got older, and partly because Richie is a Terror. Also, there seemed to be a societal expectation that Eddie was supposed to grow out of sleepovers, even though he kind of misses them.

He waits a minute to see if Richie is going to respond, before he realizes that he’s actually drifted off this time. With his eyes closed and no Hawaiian print on his body, Richie really does look like someone else. Have his eyelashes really always been that long?

Eddie leaves quickly, carefully shutting Richie’s bedroom door behind him, but not before straightening his shoes on the floor next to the bed. He offers a quiet goodbye to Mrs. Tozier before he’s off again, back the way he came, leaving his bike propped up against a tree before descending into the Barrens.

Bird-watching, as it turns out, requires a lot less sitting still and not talking than Eddie thought, mostly because, as Stan somewhat mournfully tells Eddie, there’s nothing out today but couple of grackles bathing in the shallows of the Kenduskeag, water glimmering off of their oil-slick tail feathers. So they hang out in the clubhouse instead.

“Why’d you call me from Richie’s house?” Stan asks from the hammock. Eddie sits on the floor below him with a comic—they’ve been switching off, but Eddie’s watch broke yesterday and Stan’s runs slow, so it’s a more lax system than it usually is. Also—Eddie finds that he’s not as militant about it when it’s not Richie.

“Richie’s got the bubonic plague,” Eddie replies, turning a page in his comic. He’s already read this one.

"Yeesh," Stan says, also turning a page, but in his bird watching book. Eddie doesn't really get it, and he and Richie have made definitely fun of him for it when it's just the two of them. "I guess I'm staying far away from him for the foreseeable future. What happened, did he finally get bitten by a rat when he was smoking by the dumpsters behind the Aladdin?"

Eddie gags. "He does that? He's going to get tetanus."

"I mean," Stan says. "He probably does. I think he smokes to look cool, though."

Eddie laughs. "He's not *Beverly*," he says. "Who does he think he's going to fool?"

"The day you start understanding Richie, you let me know," Stan says, rolling his eyes.

"What isn't there to understand?" Eddie asks, shaking his head. "The whole world knows *exactly* what he's thinking because he says whatever passes through his head."

Stan hums. "Yeah, sometimes."

Eddie looks up at him. "You think he doesn't?"

Stan gives him a long look, and then abruptly turns back to his book. "Never mind."

Something about the way Stan says it has Eddie sitting up. "What do you mean, never mind?"

Stan pauses, like he's deliberating. "It's just..." he says, after a long pause. "Do you think Richie actually likes girls?"

Eddie squints. "I sure hope so, with all the jokes he makes about fucking my mom."

"Yeah, but did you ever think that he makes all those jokes about fucking your mom because he doesn't actually want to?" Stan says.

"*Of course* he doesn't want to fuck my mom, Stan," Eddie says,

indignant on Richie's behalf. "He's just joking."

"I know that!" Stan says, getting annoyed. "I mean, like, because he doesn't want to actually sleep with a woman."

"I don't think that'd be that weird," Eddie says, honestly just confused at this point. "He's only fourteen."

Stan exhales through his nose, quick and exasperated. "Forget it," he says, opening his book again, but then he says, "I'm not saying he has to want to *sleep with* a woman, I'm just saying I don't think he's even interested in *kissing a girl*."

Something about the emphasis Stan places on "girl" knocks whatever Eddie was going to say out of Eddie's mouth. He opens his mouth, closes it, and then opens it again. "You think he likes boys?" Eddie says stupidly, still not really believing that they're still talking about the same Richie. Richie, with all the your mom jokes, and all the stupid shit about not being a virgin, and always asking "is she hot?".

Stan gives him another long, indecipherable look. "I think he likes *someone*," he says cryptically. Eddie waits for him to continue, and when Stan doesn't, tries to cast in his mind who Richie could possibly have a crush on, but all he comes up with is a blank. Stan's got that look on his face, that *don't-ask-me-anything-else-because-I'm-not-telling* face, and Eddie knows better than to question it, so he just goes back to his comic, even though reading it seems pretty pointless now that his world feels like it's shifted on its axis.

On Saturday, after Eddie's mother's already felt his forehead and neck for any "phantom fevers"—and by the grace of God decided he doesn't have one—and made sure he's had four glasses of water to go with all of the vitamins she's laid out for him, she sends him out to pick up his medicine from Mr. Keane. Which he does, resentfully, because Mr. Keane clearly knows that Eddie knows that it's all bullshit, and gives Eddie that horrible little smile when he picks up his inhaler and medicine. Eddie doesn't get what kind of sick joy he's

getting out of selling Eddie fake pills and medically ineffective asthma inhalers, but there's something under those smiles that makes Eddie leave the drug store as fast as he can.

Instead of going home right away, though, he stops by Richie's. He'd called earlier, while his mom was napping in front of the TV, so he knows Richie's home.

When he gets there, there aren't any cars in the driveway, and Richie answers the door instead of Mrs. Tozier, meaning that she's not home. Eddie fights down the flurry of nerves that he gets, seeing Richie in the doorway, looking much better and bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"I'm so glad you're here," Richie says dramatically, as Eddie follows him up to his room. "My parents are taking a day trip to Bangor, and I've been on house arrest—it's so fucking boring, you wouldn't believe—and the DVR is broken so I can't even watch reruns. Plus, my parents forgot to pay the cable bill this month so the only thing on is PBS. Which, sure, Sesame Street is fine, Oscar is a real inspiration to me and all, what with the shirts, but I'm going to shoot my fucking brains out of I have to watch more Elmo. I would take the muppets at this point, even Gonzo."

Gonzo? Eddie thinks, and realizes exactly how subdued Richie had been the other day, and that he had kind of missed him at full energy. "You seem better," he says.

Richie snorts. "Yeah, I've pretty much got the old chap beat, my mom just wants to make sure I don't infect anyone." He looks pointedly at Eddie. "By which I think she means you, because she knows how batshit your mom is."

Eddie flushes at the thought of Mrs. Tozier's pity. He wishes, the way he has so often for the past couple of years, that his mom could just be normal, and that he didn't have to jump through all these hoops just to see his friends, or that he could, god forbid, catch a cold and stay home for a few days without being airlifted to the Derry Hospital, or something. "I can't stay too long," he says instead, the unspoken *My mom is expecting me back* hanging in the air between them.

“Oh,” Richie says, “Okay.” He sits down on his bed, and Eddie notices that his shoes are where Eddie left them, next to the bed with the laces neatly tucked in. The sight of them makes his cheeks warm, for whatever reason, so he quickly looks away.

“How’s Stan the Man?” Richie asks, after Eddie’s sat down on the bed next to him, leaving a comfortable few inches between them. “I bet he dragged you out birdwatching with him.”

Eddie rolls his eyes. “Yeah, only thank God there weren’t any actual birds. We just hung out in the club house.” As soon as he’s said it though, he remembers what Stan had shared with Eddie in said club house, and his heart skips a beat. He hadn’t forgotten about it—had spent all of yesterday and this morning thinking about it, actually—but having the full weight of Richie’s attention on him had made it fade to the back of his head for a few minutes.

Richie snorts. “I don’t get what’s up with him and that book, but I’ll be damned if those little pencils don’t get me every time. He’s so still, though. Makes you wonder what he’s really thinking about,” he adds, leering at Eddie. Eddie shoves at his shoulder and clears his throat.

“Obviously *you* couldn’t do it,” Eddie says. “You’ve never sat still a day in your life.”

Richie doesn’t bother disagreeing, just throws his hand up. “You get me, sweet Eds. That’s why I’m glad you’re here—even if you’ll be stolen away soon by the voluptuous Mrs. K.”

Eddie doesn’t know what *voluptuous* means, and he’s not going to ask. More importantly, Stan’s got to be wrong about Richie. “She doesn’t know I’m here,” Eddie says.

“Did you sneak out?” Richie asks, sounding impressed. He wipes a fake tear away. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“No, asshole, I was picking up my stupid inhaler from the drug store. It’s so dumb,” Eddie says, the conversation turning sharply serious before he even realizes it. “I don’t know why she keeps sending me there when we both know it’s totally fake. Like, I barely even use it anymore.”

Richie scoots closer to Eddie on the bed and puts a tentative hand on Eddie's shoulder. "Maybe she's in love with Mr. Keane," he offers, and Eddie rolls his eyes.

"That doesn't even make sense. She's sending *me*, not going herself. Also, *gross*."

"No, seriously! Like, have you ever actually checked the receipts? Maybe there's a secret love message there, or something. Or a cipher! How fucked up would that be?"

Eddie laughs, despite himself. "What does that make me, her messenger?"

Richie's eyes light up. "Oh, my god, yeah! Like, you, in little suspenders and red shorts, like the pharmaceutical industry's very own Cupid of fake, manipulative bullshit!" He flops back on the bed, clearly imagining it, and giggles. "You'd be like, I'm adorable, *and* I'm here to deliver you your monthly dose psychological issues!"

Eddie flops next to him, his feet dangling off the edge of the bed. "Please don't imagine it. I swear to god if my mom wasn't such a nutso she'd be exactly the type to sign me up for Irish step dancing classes."

Richie's eyes widen and he turns to Eddie. "You just made the mistake of your life, Kaspbrak. Irish *step dancing*?"

Eddie groans and presses the heels of his palms to his eyes to block out Richie's grinning face. "My dad did it when he was a kid," he says miserably. "But I managed to avoid it, because *apparently* having a seriously fucked up mom actually *does* has its perks."

"Apparently," Richie echoes, and they're silent for a moment.

It's in this silent camaraderie, and Eddie's renewed sense that Richie *has* to be into girls, because there's nothing to point that he *wouldn't* be, that he feels confident enough to say, "Actually, Stan said something really weird yesterday."

"What? Was it some weird shit about the mating patterns of red-breasted robins? Because I keep asking him to go into detail and he's

pretty much refused every time,” Richie replies lazily.

“What the fuck? No, he just said he thought you liked someone,” Eddie says, deciding to leave off the part about liking boys. If Richie doesn’t like anyone, then Stan is just going to get shit for being nosy, instead embarrassing Richie because he thinks he might be gay.

Richie stiffens on the bed next to Eddie. “What?” He says, sitting up abruptly and looking down at Eddie.

Eddie sits up too. “What, do you?” Richie doesn’t say anything, just twists his hands in his lap and turns his head to stare straight forward. “Hold on, you actually do?” Eddie asks, something to the left of shocked. When Stan had first suggested that Richie didn’t like girls, Eddie had taken it to mean that Richie just didn’t like girls *yet*, and privately agreed. “Who?”

Richie is still uncharacteristically silent. Eddie is bewildered. “Is it someone in at school? It isn’t, Bev, is it?” For some reason, the thought of Richie *also* having a crush on Beverly makes his stomach twist.

Richie laughs, short and strained. “I don’t like Bev,” he says. Eddie peers into his face, confused.

“You don’t have to tell me,” he says, slowly, because he’s become increasingly aware of how uncomfortable this is making Richie, and he’s not used to seeing those side of him. Richie *hasn’t* really ever talked about girls before, and maybe there was a reason for it. Eddie’s mind darts back to Stan saying *I don’t think he’s even interested in kissing a girl*, but he pushes it away, and puts a hand on Richie’s shoulder, mirroring the way he had done same to Eddie’s a few minutes ago. “It’s okay, it doesn’t really matter.”

Richie turns back to Eddie, eyes indecipherable and huge behind his glasses. “It *does* matter,” he says, almost miserably.

This is all going so different than Eddie thought it would. “It’s okay,” he says again, taken aback. “Really.”

Richie bites the inside of his cheek and gives Eddie a long look. Eddie

fidgets awkwardly. His hand is still on Richie's shoulder, and the longer he leaves it there, the more he feels like he can't take it off without it being a whole thing.

"Okay," Richie says, finally. "Just don't laugh, alright?"

Eddie shakes his head, still confused. Is the girl he likes embarrassing, or something? Is it Marge, who sits in the back of the room and still talks to her stuffed animals? She doesn't seem like she'd be Richie's type, but now that he thinks about it, he really doesn't know Richie's type at all.

It's not Marge, though, because the next thing he knows, Richie's taking a huge breath, like he's about to dive very deep underwater, and then he says, "*I like you*," all in one exhale, so fast that Eddie almost doesn't catch it.

Eddie blinks, his mind blank. "What?" he can hear himself saying distantly, and Richie's in front of him, but really he's seeing Stan saying I think he likes *someone*, and the way he had looked at Eddie like there was a secret he wasn't in on.

It turns out there *was* a secret he wasn't in on, after all.

He's jerked back to the present moment of Richie, and his hand on Richie's shoulder still, and the bomb that Richie's dropped in lap, and realizes that he well and truly has no idea what the fuck to say.

"Uh," Richie says, breaking the silence, and shifts away so that Eddie's hand falls back to the bed. "I mean."

Eddie is still shellshocked. "Me?" Is all he can think to say, and the look on Richie's face is enough to make him instantly regret it. "I didn't—I mean, I didn't know you liked..." he says, at the same time Richie says, quickly, "It's not a big deal."

Isn't it, though? he thinks at the look on Richie's face, miserable and near tears.

"You should go before your mom gets mad," Richie says after another beat of Eddie not saying anything, standing abruptly and grabbing the paper bag from the drug store off the floor of his bedroom and

shoving it into Eddie's hands. "I'll walk you to the door."

"Okay?" Eddie says. Richie could probably lead him off a cliff and he'd have no real idea of what he was doing, which is probably why it's so easy for Richie to propel him down the stairs and past his mother who's just arrived home from Bangor with impeccable timing and groceries.

"Hi, Eddie," Mrs. Tozier says, sounding pleasantly surprised to see him again so soon, but Eddie can't respond because Richie's already pushed him past the threshold and onto the front porch, and Eddie finds himself saying, "Richie—" to the already closing front door.

This is pretty much all Stan's fault, Eddie decides, after Richie still hasn't called him. All Eddie really wants is to Stop Thinking About It. If Stan had never said what he said, then Eddie would never have stupidly asked Richie about it. And If he had never asked Richie about it, then Richie would have never told him about his crush. And if Richie had never told him, then they could have just continued on like normal for the rest of August.

Except Stan *did* tell Eddie, and so he spends all of Sunday trying and failing to do his summer homework. He knows Richie hasn't started his, because they were planning to do it together. Now Eddie doesn't even know if that's going to happen, because it doesn't seem like Richie wants to see him anymore.

Eddie wants to call, but his mom saw a scratch on his leg and even though he gave her a dumb excuse about a frayed wire on the screen door, she somehow suspects that it has to do with one of his friends, and is guarding the house phone with more vigilance than an investment banker with some secrets to keep. And anyway, Eddie isn't even sure he should be the one to call. Richie's the one that pushed Eddie out of his house, so he's the one who'll call Eddie. Right?

Except now Eddie isn't too sure that Richie's going to call at all. He remembers the broken look on his face when Eddie had unwittingly pressured him into a confession, and imagines that Richie's never

going to want to talk to him again. Maybe never.

The whole thing is just such a mess. Eddie's trying to reframe everything he knows about Richie with this new information, and he doesn't know how to feel about any of it. Does Richie really like him when all he does is tease Eddie and make him mad all the time? And what does it mean that Eddie only ever does the same thing right back?

Stan calls Eddie Monday morning to tell him that Bev wants to talk to him. Eddie is still mad at Stan by proxy for ruining whatever's been ruined, but he takes the call anyway because whenever Bev wants to call him they have to do it this way—through Stan or sometimes Ben—because Eddie's mom screens calls, and if she knew that Beverly Marsh was calling the Kaspbrak abode to talk to Eddie, there'd be some sort of hell to pay. Technically, he's not supposed to be hanging out with her at all, and the rest of the Losers are on shaky ground, but he's still dutifully taking his placebos even though they both know it's bullshit, so she really has no choice but to loosen the leash ever so slightly to avoid Eddie acting out and outwardly hating her forever.

Anyway, Sonia Kaspbrak remains about as anti-semitic as she's always been, but she doesn't like any of Eddie's friends on principal in the first place, and at least Stan tucks his shirts in. Or something. Eddie's just glad that they only have one phone so his mother can't listen in on the other line.

As it is, she's asleep in the recliner with the TV on, so it's easy enough for Eddie to get the details from Stan and head into town to meet Beverly at the Center Street drug store.

Bev's already there when Eddie walks up, leaning against the wall of the drug store by the alley and smoking a cigarette. Judging by the newly purchased pack sticking out of the back pocket of her shorts, she's just lit up a fresh stick, but she drops it to the ground and steps on it with her shoe. Even though Eddie still carries his inhaler around, the Losers know that he doesn't have asthma and therefore smoking around him isn't going to trigger an attack—Bev just doesn't smoke around him because she knows that his mom would have a fit if she smelled even more cigarette smoke on him than she already

does sometimes. Richie actually extends the same courtesy, most of the time. Eddie sometimes ends up borrowing one of his clean shirts before he goes home from the Tozier's if he's spent the whole day there, so his mom doesn't get suspicious.

The thought of wearing Richie's shirts, which he hadn't ever given a thought to until right now, makes Eddie's stomach do a strange flip, so he chalks it up to the insanity of this past weekend and tries to focus on the task at hand—namely, figuring out why Beverly called him in the first place.

He's sure that it's about Richie, and he's right. After wandering through the town square for a bit, they decide to double back and walk down to the Barrens to skip stones and listen to Bev's radio. A thorn catches on Eddie's calf and leaves a shallow scratch on the back of his leg, but other than that the steep walk down to the shallow part of the Kendsukeag that cuts through the Barrens a couple hundred feet from their club house is uneventful.

It's while he's sitting on some rocks by the passing water—Eddie carefully treating his scratch with an antiseptic wipe before applying a bandaid, while Bev stands in water up to her ankles, skipping stones with her boots and socks discarded on the bank—that the whole Thing that gets brought up. Bev's radio lies a few feet away, safe from the rushing water, and there's some Wham! song that's playing quietly. The song itself is a couple of years old—it's actually kind of weird to hear it on the radio now, and the auditory reminder throws Eddie back into a vague memory about early grade school. Now that he's older, he realizes that the lyrics are decidedly adult-themed, but if he tunes the words out it's just kind of nice and breathy and drifts over the rushing water easily.

"So I talked to Richie yesterday," Bev says, after she manages to skip a rock a very impressive seven times, and then she carefully picks her way back through the creek to sit by Eddie on his sun warmed rock.

Eddie flushes. "And?" He says, pointedly retying his shoe laces. They were tied before, but he makes sure to redo them extra tight so that his laces don't get too dirty.

"He said he told you," she says simply, pulling her cigarette pack out

her pocket and pulling one out, playing with it between her fingers.

“Does everyone know but me?” Eddie asks, incredulous, but he gestures that she can go ahead and light it. “And since when are you his confidant?” He says, knowing full well that Richie and Bev have always been close, in a way that none of the other Losers ever really understood. It comes out sounding jealous, and he hopes she doesn’t notice.

If she does, she doesn’t comment on it, only takes a long drag before carefully exhaling over her shoulder, away from Eddie. “We share cigarettes,” she says, like that explains things. “I don’t know, he told me about it, like last fall, but I—“

“Wait, hold up,” Eddie says, his world tilting a little. “I thought you meant he just told you about it like, this *weekend*. You’ve known since *last fall*?”

“Well, yeah,” Bev says, looking a little sorry for Eddie.

“Why didn’t you tell me!?” Eddie hisses, somewhat frantic. This whole thing could have been less of a fucking train wreck if he had had some kind of a warning.

Beverly just gives him A Look, which says something along the lines of *Why do you think, asshole?* Eddie can understand where she’s coming from and feels appropriately chastened, but the whole thing has seriously thrown his life into chaos so he’s still a little miffed.

“Well, do you like him back?” Beverly asks a beat later, just going straight for it.

Eddie gapes at her. “I don’t *know*,” he says, his voice cracking embarrassingly. “I never—I didn’t think that he—I never thought this was something that was going to come up! Ever! I didn’t know Richie’s—“

Bev puts her hand on his arm in an attempt to fend off his impending panic attack. It kind of works, but Eddie still has to take a pull of his inhaler. It’s almost more embarrassing than the panic attack itself, but Bev doesn’t mention that they both know it’s bullshit, and Eddie

doesn't address that yes, he still carries the stupid thing with him, because he still hasn't figured out how to go without it.

Eddie puts the inhaler back in his fanny pack, only a little mortified, and Bev keeps her hand on his arm. "Richie's kind of freaking, out, too," she offers, maybe to make Eddie feel better about freaking out himself. "I think he thinks you hate him."

Eddie looks at her, wide eyed and kind of horrified. Bev puts her hands up, and her cigarette is still hanging out of her mouth. It would be kind of a funny picture under different circumstances. "Which I know you *don't*," she assures him, taking her cigarette out of her mouth and stubbing it out before laying it carefully next to her shoe. "He's just being stupid."

"I don't know what to do," Eddie says, curling his knees up to his chest and hugging them.

"You don't have to *do* anything," Bev says. "You just have to keep being his friend, if you want to. Or at least not be an asshole to him about it."

"That's not very helpful," Eddie says, muffled because he's buried his head in his knees.

Sometime during his panic attack, the Wham! song had ended, and something else comes on, something Eddie doesn't recognize. Bev rubs his back between his shoulder blades, her hand through the material of his t shirt more of a comfort than he's ever gotten from any family member and making Eddie wildly remember the stupid fantasy he used to have that Bev was his sister. With her dad and his mom it would be a supremely fucked up house to be in, but she's always been a calming presence to him, and that's pretty much what he needs about one hundred percent of the time.

"Look, Eddie," Bev says, tugging at his shoulder so that he lifts at his head. "I'm not saying *now*, but you have to talk to Richie. So take your time, sort your feelings out, and then you two can kiss and make up. Or not."

"How am I supposed to sort my feelings out?" Eddie says, an edge of

panic in his voice. Bev continues rubbing his back.

“Maybe just think about it some more?” Bev says, but she sounds unsure. “Sometimes you don’t realize you like someone until you realize they like you,” she adds, her freckles standing out against the blush now dusting her cheeks.

“That’s great and all, but I think this is a little different than what you and Ben have going on,” Eddie says, and it comes out all strangled sounding.

Bev’s face flushes a deeper red. “I didn’t say anything about Ben,” she says.

“I know you didn’t,” Eddie says, putting his head back down. The unknown song takes this as its cue to end, and *How Will I Know* by Whitney Houston starts playing from the radio. Even Beverly sighs, and she retracts her hand from Eddie’s back to get up and change the station.

On Tuesday, Sonia forces Eddie to stay inside and play Monopoly with their neighbor’s kid, Stephen, while she gossips with his mother over some Stevia-packed ice tea. Stephen is two years younger than Eddie and his parents refuse to get him glasses for some reason, so he can’t even see the names of the spots on the board unless he leans about an inch away, and even then it’s really a toss up as to whether he’s going to read it as Broadway or Boardwalk.

So basically, it’s boring as shit. Monopoly isn’t fun with only two people in the first place, and that’s before you throw a legally blind twelve year old into the mix. Plus, it just reminds Eddie of the time all the Losers played Monopoly together in Bill’s basement. Also, Eddie’s fourteen, and so the whole situation is just embarrassing. He’s positive that his mother only let Stephen in the house because she sensed Eddie’s dislike for him, and knew that there was no chance he could get attached, or, God forbid, make *another* friend.

Eddie manages to get let off for the afternoon after an entire morning of wrangling Stephen and making sure he doesn’t eat too many mini-

marshmallows—maybe Richie was right, he really *is* a fucking babysitter—so he ends up biking over to Ben's. He's got some questions burning a hole in his head, but he's not even sure what they are, or if he's going to ask them—Ben just seems like the ideal candidate. On the way over, Eddie tries not to think about how Stephen's serious case of myopia had only reminded him of Richie, and how much not talking to Richie in three days has only served to make it apparent that he actually misses him, a lot, and then Eddie forces himself to stop thinking about that because he's flipping down the kickstand to his bike and walking up the steps of Ben's front porch.

Once inside, Eddie's only able to keep himself from Talking About It for the five minutes it takes to get glasses of water and wander into Ben's room.

“How did you know that you like Beverly?” he asks, almost as soon as the door swings shut behind Ben and the New Kids On The Block are now grinning in their brightly colored tees, and Eddie doesn't even bother to try and make it and sound casual because he's never been casual a day in his life, and it would be suspicious if he tried to start now, anyway. More than the paralyzing fear of someone finding out that he might—*might*—like a boy, and the mortification that that boy is maybe—*maybe*—Richie, is the overwhelming exhaustion he feels at this whole thing. He just wants someone to tell him how he feels so he can decide either way what to do.

Ben doesn't a) ask why Eddie's asking, b) ask him who he likes, or c) react to Eddie bringing up his crush on Beverly even though they've definitely never talked about it before. Instead he just twists his mouth thoughtfully and looks up at his New Kids poster.

Finally, he shrugs. “I don't know,” he says finally. “I just did.”

Eddie sighs, quick and disappointed. “That doesn't help me at all,” he says, narrowing his eyes and focusing on one of the glass bottles on Ben's desk. Since last summer, when Ben took down all his Derry research off the walls, he's been experimenting with different forms of interior design. Right now it's glass—he's strung some bottles up across his window, and the afternoon sun glints through it, casting refractions of light around the room. Eddie is stuck by a quick pang

of jealousy at both Ben's architectural prowess, and his mother's leniency with hanging glass in her son's room. Sonia would just about have a heart attack if Eddie so much as kept a Coke bottle to put pennies in.

Ben hums. "Maybe it's different for different people, though." He pauses. "Maybe the fact that you're wondering about it at all means that you do."

"Like them?" Eddie says, voice embarrassingly high pitched. "You think?"

Ben puts up a placating hand. "Not necessarily," he says, and even Eddie can see that he's unsure of how to proceed. "But it's worth a thought?"

Eddie realizes belatedly that Ben might not have actually been the best person to ask for advice, because Beverly doesn't like him back—or rather, she probably does, but Ben doesn't *know* it yet. *There's no one who can actually help me with this*, he thinks despairingly, and changes the subject to Ben's new Walkman that his mom got him for his birthday.

That night, when Eddie's laying in bed, he wonders briefly if Richie would pick up if he called right now. It's a stupid idea, of course—there's a 75% chance that Richie wouldn't even be the one to pick up the phone, and even if he did, if Eddie's mom caught him talking to someone on the phone late at night, she'd assume the worst and cut their phone lines herself.

Instead, he rolls onto his side and, after a quick and shameful puff of his inhaler to hopefully preemptively stave off any anxiety, focuses his energy towards Ben and Bev's respective advice. When Eddie really puts his mind to it, his thought spirals rival Richie's and he's somewhat determined to get this over with so he can go back to normal—even, he thinks, squirming slightly, if his new normal is completely different than the old one.

Sometimes you don't realize you like someone until you realize they like

you, Bev's words come back to him, like a cartoon thought bubble floating through his bedroom walls, and then *Maybe the fact that you're wondering about it at all means that you do* takes its turn fucking with his head.

Now that he's alone in his bedroom, Eddie can see a certain degree of truth in both of their statements. A few days ago, he had been completely flabbergasted when Richie had told him he liked him. Eddie hadn't been able to understand it, *at all*, but now the whole weekend has come and gone and he's still thinking about Richie. If he didn't like him, he would know, right?

Eddie's decided to go back to the beginning, when he first met Richie in third grade, and methodically go through every interaction that he can remember to retroactively analyze his own actions, when instead, a memory that he'd almost forgotten surfaces to his head—about a day last fall when he and Richie had been only the ones to make it to the down to the Barrens, probably for the last time that year.

That day, Richie had offered Eddie a pull off his cigarette. This had been been a month or two after school had started last year, and it was just starting to get too cold to hang out in the Barrens for any length of time. If Sonia knew that Eddie was out there, sitting next to Richie, a lit cigarette between them and late autumn leaves piled up in drifts by the wind, she would have probably have moved Eddie to Bangor at a moment's notice. As it was, though, it was all the reasons that she *would* freak out that sent a quiet thrill down Eddie's spine, and made Eddie almost accept Richie's offer.

Instead he shook his head, mouth pressed into a thin line. They were still testing the limits of Eddie's "asthma", but Eddie thought that he still believed that the smoke would trigger an attack enough that it actually would bring one about. He had learned in the past year that you really only had to *believe* in an effect for the cause to become dangerous.

So Richie had just laughed, bringing the cigarette up for another drag, his eyes dancing above the hand that covered his grin. Richie's the kind of kid that resists exchanging shorts for pants in the fall for as long as possible, but that day was cold enough that he had relented and was wearing jeans and a denim jacket, causing an

overall effect that Bev referred to as a “Canadian tuxedo.” He was still wearing a ridiculously patterned shirt, but it was open over a long sleeved shirt.

Eddie had come to the Barrens with his coat and his gloves and hat and scarf, but even as the sun started to go down and it grew colder, he found himself removing his scarf and handing it off to Richie.

“You sure?” Richie had said. “It’ll smell like smoke.”

“I’m sure I’d rather just wash my scarf than let you die of hypothermia,” Eddie had grumbled, hunching his shoulders up to keep his neck warm.

“That’s cute, Eds,” Richie said, stubbing his cigarette out and leaning back on his hands.

“Its not cute, and neither am I,” Eddie said. “I just don’t want you on my conscious.” But he had taken off one of his gloves and given it to Richie anyway, and tried not to look too hard at Richie’s hands, sitting there, one gloved and one bare. The bare hand was his right, the one closest to Eddie, and Eddie had had the strange thought that if he just grabbed Richie’s hand, then they’d both be warm.

“One day,” he had said after a pause, “I’ll smoke one. But just once.”

Richie had blinked, and laughed again, scooting closer and slinging an arm around Eddie’s shoulders. “That’ll be the day,” Spaghetti,” he’d said, and if Eddie had just let him do it, well, it was warmer that way, with Richie’s arm around him.

Now, awake in dark and alone in his room, face burning in the dark, Eddie can’t believe that’s he’s forgotten this, and he feels incredibly stupid. He turns his head into his pillow and screams quietly, once, because apparently *he’s had a big stupid crush on Richie for long enough that’d he’d said he would smoke a cigarette.*

Shit, is what he thinks first, after he’s done some more screaming, and then, *What am I going to do about this?*

Eddie spends all of Wednesday morning indoors. His mother's been unexpectedly called in to work, and she makes Eddie promise before he leaves to take his medicine, not leave the house, and be good. Eddie grudgingly kisses her cheek as she leaves, and then promptly disobeys her as soon as she's gone, disposing of his pills for the day—except for his nighttime dose—into a cleaned out Crisco can that he keeps in the back of his closet, with his old model airplane sets that his mother refused to let him play with. They were all birthday gifts, but she took one look at the glue and banned him from ever touching them. He's never understood why she didn't just throw them out, but it didn't matter in the end because he read the back of one of those little tubes once and gotten rid of them himself.

Eddie still takes his iron pills, though, and then, he tries to formulate a plan. Confronting Richie makes nerves alight in his stomach, spouting from so deep down that there's no way he can push them to the side, but it's been almost a week at this point, and the thought of Richie moping around pathetically like Eddie knows he's doing makes him—sad.

So, he needs a strategy to get Richie to open his door to Eddie. One time, Richie broke Eddie's inhaler by stepping on it and crushing it during a long, drawn out and over acted joke about a car salesman, and he had felt so bad that he isolated himself and didn't talk to Eddie for three days. Eddie had to *accept a handwritten note from Richie* so that Richie didn't feel so bad and would let himself just *talk* to Eddie again. And that was a hunk of plastic that Eddie didn't even *pay* for himself, and didn't even dispense real medicine. Eddie thinks that he still has the letter, too—he probably rationalized keeping it because it was funny, but looking back on it, seeing Eddie's name written out in Richie's handwriting had just made Eddie feel nice.

Anyway, Eddie's sure that if he tells Richie he wants to come over, Richie won't want to talk to him and will barricade himself in. So, after some deliberation, he decides to go with the simplest course of action.

Bev picks up almost right away. "Did you talk to Richie?" she asks, as soon as she's answered the phone and Eddie says hi.

"Working on it," Eddie says grimly. "I'm going to try today, but I'm

pretty sure he's going to force himself into indentured servitude in Guatemala before he lets me into his house to talk about his feelings. Which I don't want to do either, by the way, but he hasn't talked to me in five days and it's really fucking stressing me out."

"So what're you gonna do?" Bev asks.

Eddie takes a deep breath. "Simple. Lie to him. Can you call him and tell him you're coming over so when the doorbell rings, he answers it? Then I can just-jump him, and force him to let me in."

Bev whistles low. (This is mildly irritating to Eddie, who at fourteen, still can't whistle, despite multiple secret hours spent practicing in his room. He'd ask Richie for pointers, because Richie can practically whistle all the parts to Bohemian Rhapsody at once, but first he'd have to *ask* Richie for help—which is mortifying enough, without even considering that the primary instructions for whistling are "put your mouth in the shape of an O and blow." The alternative—furtively hiding his lack of ability and being forced to spend the rest of his life without being able to whistle—is far, far better.) "Get 'em, tiger."

Eddie flushes. "Not like that."

Bev laughs. "I know. What are you going to say?"

Eddie pretends he didn't hear her. "So, yeah, you don't have to actually go over there, just, you know, call him. And lie."

"Will do, Captain Kaspbrak," she says, and then they both hang up at the same time, like submarine operators in Indiana Jones.

Eddie waits ten minutes, and then bikes to Richie's house, disobeying the second of his mother's commandments for the day. Leaving without her permission is a risky business because his mom won't let him have a house key, so he's kind of banking on no one in their right mind wanting to rob the Kaspbrak house. Not only do they not have much of value, but Eddie's heard about mothers lifting cars and performing other incredible feats of strength when their children are in danger, and he's got half the mind that his mom could and would do the same if she found an intruder in their home.

Just like Eddie's planned, Richie answers the door easily and without hesitation when Eddie rings the doorbell. He feels half bad for the deception when Richie's eyes widen in horror, but then Eddie's jammed his sneaker into the door frame so that Richie can't slam it shut. Richie still puts up a valiant effort, but the wirey strength that makes Eddie so good at running comes into play, and Eddie's able to wrestle the door open.

They end up in a pile of gangly, fourteen-year-old limbs in the entry way, and then Richie's quickly scrabbling off of Eddie from where he's landed on the carpet. Eddie scrambles up to close the door, because even though he's cleared the first hurdle of entering Richie's house, he doesn't put it past him to bolt, right out of his own home and down the street to who knows where.

Eddie's breathing hard by the time he gets the door shut and locked and turns around to face Richie, but he doesn't feel anywhere close to a panic attack.

There's an awkward silence, and then Eddie says, "Hi." He doesn't have a plan beyond this, and just trusts that if anything else, between he and Richie, *some* sort of talking will get done.

"Hi," Richie says, pushing his glasses up quickly. There's a red mark on his cheek where Eddie thinks his elbow may have connected. "Did you tell Bev to lie to me?" he asks, but he doesn't sound mad. Nervous, yes, but also almost impressed at the same time.

Eddie sighs. "Yes, I did."

Richie screws up his face and crosses his arms. "Why?" he asks. "You could have—You didn't have to—"

"Of course I had to!" Eddie interrupts, gesturing wildly. "You didn't speak to me for three days in third grade because you accidentally broke my inhaler!"

Richie buries his face in his hands, messing up his glasses. "Oh, don't remind me of that," he groans.

"Look, Richie," Eddie says quickly, before Richie really Gets Going

about the stupid inhaler. “We need to talk.”

“Do we?” Richie says, a pained expression on his face. Eddie rolls his eyes, glances around to see if anyone’s home—the house seems empty—and then grabs Richie’s wrist to pull him to his bedroom. Richie is eerily quiet on the way up the stairs, so Eddie fills the silence with the kind of chatter only he and Richie are really capable of, about his mom and the last few days and Ben’s glass collection. In a strange way, their conversation and pattern of movement isn’t unlike when he came over last, both coming into the house, and on the way out. Eddie’s hand feels hot on Richie’s wrist; was it like this last time?

Richie doesn’t say a word until Eddie’s closed the bedroom door behind him, and pushed him roughly down to sit on the bed. Eddie sits next to him, opens his mouth, but instead of something nice comes out, he says, “So are you going to ignore me forever, or what?”

“I’m—I’m not ignoring you!” Richie says. Eddie gives him A Look, but this only unlocks whatever’s kept Richie’s hesitant this whole time. “How was I supposed to know you’d go all-*dominatrix* on me and push me around my own home?”

“That’s—I’m not a dominatrix!” Eddie says, exasperated. “How else am I supposed to get you to talk to me?”

“Usually you have the opposite problem,” Richie points out.

Eddie rolls his eyes. “That’s so you, Richie, to be a pain in the ass no matter what. You’re a fucking chameleon, you know that?”

“I was a pain in your mom’s ass last night,” Richie retorts, and Eddie’s never been so relieved to hear one of Richie’s stupid jokes about his mom in his life, and he laughs. Richie doesn’t join him, though, and Eddie doesn’t like that, so he decides to try and get closer to the point.

“Look, Richie,” Eddie says, trying to find the right words. “Why didn’t you call me?”

Richie stares at him. “I...” he says, and then shakes his head. “You

told me not to call you, ever.”

“This was a little different,” Eddie argues. “I kind of missed you.” It’s so embarrassing to say, but he knows that they’re never going to get anywhere if he isn’t at least a little honest.

Richie flushes a dark red. “You shouldn’t say stuff like that,” he mumbles. “Not since—you know.”

Eddie wants to open his mouth and just *tell* Richie already, but he doesn’t think it’s the right moment. And he’s scared. So instead, he says, “Why did you tell me? That day?”

Richie seems to shrink back into himself, and Eddie *hates* it, wishes he hadn’t asked, but he’s been working it back and forth in his head for days now, because Richie could have just avoided the question, or just said he didn’t want to tell. But then he did.

He’s pretty sure Richie’s just going to dive under the bed or out the window, but to Eddie’s surprise, he says, in a small voice, “I don’t think you get it—when it was *you* that was asking, I wanted to tell you so bad that I just—did.”

“Even though—even though it was scary?” Eddie says, searching for something in Richie’s face to make this next part easier.

“Yes, Eddie,” Richie says, suddenly frustrated. “Why are you even asking me? It’s not fucking fun for me, you know.”

“I know,” Eddie says quickly, “I just—um. I don’t really get it.” *Why you like me*, goes unspoken, and Richie goes back to staring into his lap. “Why you told me *then*, I mean,” Eddie clarifies.

“I mean—” Richie says, giving into the conversation, his gaze flitting quickly to Eddie’s face and then away, even though he clearly doesn’t want to talk about it. “You could have hung out with anyone, but then you called me. And then I got sick...” he trails off, like this is all the explanation needed.

“Well, yeah,” Eddie says, not getting it. “Because I didn’t *want* to hang out with anyone else.”

Richie snorts. “Yeah, right. Everyone else was probably just busy.”

Eddie shakes his head, confused. “They were. But I still wanted to hang out with *you*, first.”

Richie throws his hands up into the air. “Then how did you even know they were busy, unless you called them first?!” he says, almost shouting.

“Because I wanted to make sure that I could have a backup plan if *you* were busy, you dumbass!” Eddie shouts back, fully aware that if Richie’s mom is actually home, she can probably hear them yelling, and not caring because he’s so frustrated that he can’t even get to what he came over to say.

Richie rolls his eyes and pushes his glasses up before gesturing wildly with his hands. “Oh, *sure*, you just called everyone and said, ‘Hi, I want to hang out with Richie today but in the interest of saving time, are you free just in case he’s too busy fucking my mom?’”

“Yes,” Eddie says, throwing his own hands in the air now, “That is exactly what I did! Except for the part about you and my mom!”

Richie’s hands drop back down to rest on the mattress. “What are you even saying?” Richie says, tugging at the hem of his shirt.

“I’m *saying*, I like you too,” Eddie says, and feels like a huge bubble has popped in his chest. He doesn’t even know how Richie’s going to react, but he still feels relieved. Maybe it’s because he’s liked Richie, all this time, and didn’t know it, and now he does, or maybe it’s the way that once he’s said it, he can’t take it back. It feels good, the way breaking a plate can feel good.

Richie gapes at him—his mouth is hanging open, and everything. He opens and closes it silently a couple of times, before he finally scrunches up his nose and pushes up his glasses and says, “What?”

“I *said*,” Eddie says, feeling suddenly and irrationally irritated that he has to repeat himself, even though even he can see that there wasn’t much lead up to what he’s said. “I—”

“Since when?” Richie interrupts incredulously. “Since, like,

yesterday?”

Eddie furrows his brows, even though he kind of gets where Richie is coming from. “No, not since yesterday. Would you just listen to me? Because—”

“No,” Richie continues on, and chews on the inside of his lip. He’s got a frantic energy now, and Eddie’s horrified to realize that it’s a *bad* frantic energy. “Because if you’re making fun of me, or, or you’re joking, then—”

“You always let me borrow your shirts,” Eddie interrupts, because it’s what pops into his head, and he’s mortified but willing to push through and be brave if Richie would just stop looking the same way he did when Henry Bowers broke his glasses the first time—terrified and embarrassed and pretty fucking pitiable.

“What?” Richie says, confusion marring his dejection, which Eddie is going to count as a win, in some universe. “My shirts?”

Eddie flushes. It’s hard to force out the words, to try and say it as straightforward as possible, but he reaches within himself, the way he reached into himself last summer to confront It. Only this time it’s not It, it’s just Richie, small and scared in front of him in a way that Eddie hates seeing. So he takes a deep breath. “You let me wear them so I don’t go home smelling like your dumb cigarettes. And I like that.”

Richie turns as red as Eddie feels. “You like me because I let you borrow my shirts?” he says, and Jesus, this must have been how Stan felt when he was trying to tell Eddie about Richie’s feelings for him.

“Among other things, obviously!” Eddie practically shouts. “It’s just, considerate,” he says, at a slightly more moderate volume. “You act like you’re not, all the time, but I know that, um, you are, actually. So I,” he pauses, and then charges forward. “I like you.”

It’s not harder than fighting Pennywise, because that was really fucking hard, but it feels different, because instead of just choosing to fight for his survival and safety, he’s choosing to fight for his happiness.

“What else?” Richie says after a beat, leaning forward into Eddie’s space so fast that he leans back out of instinct.

“What?” Eddie says, his heart catching in his chest at how close Richie is now. He’s leaning forward, and the hand he’s got braced on the bed is right next to Eddie’s thigh, the mattress dipping and pulling them together somewhat, like a sinking ship sucking debris down with it.

“What else do you like about me?” Richie says, and he’s starting to smile now.

“I—what, do you want a fuckin’ list, or something?” Eddie splutters. “I’m not going to *write it down* for you!”

“Yes, I *want a fuckin’ list*, Eds,” Richie says, following Eddie as he’s leaning away. “Because I’ve liked you for *so long*, and I could definitely write it all down for *you*.”

“Shut up, no you couldn’t,” Eddie says, his heart full out hammering now. A week ago he could have never even pictured this happening, and now—

“Oh yes, I could,” Richie says, and to Eddie’s—*something*, he doesn’t even know what emotion he’s feeling right now—he continues, saying, “I like your hair, and your nose, and your stupid Aerosmith t shirt, and that you always have bandaids, and you hate that I smoke and say I look stupid when I do it, and that you fight with me when no one else wants to, and that you—”

Eddie claps his hands over Richie’s mouth. His whole body feels like it’s burning red. “You idiot—you don’t have to—” he says, unable to complete a full sentence, with Richie’s breath hot on his scarred palm.

Richie pulls at Eddie’s hands gently, and Eddie finds that he lets him remove them from his mouth. One of Eddie’s hands lands back on the bed, but Richie’s still holding the other one, their fingers laced together on the bed between them. Eddie finds himself staring at them, the reality of it washing over him in a warm wave.

When he looks up again, Richie's face is close again, and Eddie doesn't lean back this time, just tightens his grip on Richie's hand slightly.

"Am I supposed to ask if I can kiss you?" Richie says suddenly, uncharacteristically serious and his eyes intent behind his glasses frames. "I've never..." he trails off.

Eddie feels his ears glow hot. He hasn't either. "Um," he says intelligently, and swallows. "That's—that's okay." Richie's face falls slightly, and Eddie hurriedly adds, "I mean, you can!" He's terrible at this. "I want you to," he says, and he's never been more embarrassed in his life. His only comfort is that Richie is just as much of a mess as he is.

Richie takes a deep breath. "Okay," he says, and Eddie screws his eyes shut as Richie leans in.

It's nothing fancy—just a simple press of Richie's lips against his—but the warmth from Richie's hand and his mouth and his body heat, radiating across the inches between them, spreads through Eddie's body until he thinks he might just melt.

When they both pull back, Richie's ears are red where they're poking out of his hair. Without thinking about it, Eddie reaches out with his free hand—the one not holding Richie's—and tucks an errant curl behind his ear. There's something about the red of Richie's ear against his dark hair that Eddie likes, and suddenly Richie's pulling him into a hug, tight enough to almost knock the wind out of Eddie, except for the fact that Eddie's hugging Richie back just as hard. The hug is almost as good as the kiss, because as soon as his arms are around Richie, Eddie remembers the last few times they've hugged over the past few years—most notably, the time right after they stood in the circle in the Barrens, with cut palms some kind of indescribable feeling that there was something *more*, out there—and realizes just how much he always hated letting go. Richie's hair is crushed into the side of his face, and he breathes in deep, savoring the feeling of his ribs expanding with Richie's arms held tight around them, holding him together and keeping him safe.

Richie's not ready to tell anyone, just yet, and Eddie gets it, even though Stan and Bev and almost definitely Ben already know anyway. It feels like kind of a dick move to leave Bill and Mike out of the loop, but if Eddie really thinks about it, they probably know too.

But for now, it's almost a fun secret. There's still things to be afraid of—adults, and the other kids, and the shit on TV, but knowing that all of his friends have his back on this makes hiding it not seem so bad. Especially when there's one of those Maine cold snaps a few weeks later, and the temperature suddenly drops to the fifties for a day or two. The Losers all make plans to meet up at Bill's house to play Monopoly and mess around on Richie's Gameboy on one of those afternoons, and Eddie is so grateful to not have to play with Stephen that he thinks he's looking forward to it most.

Before that happens though, Eddie sneaks out of his house as the sun is rising and his mom is snoring upstairs in her bed. She's started taking medicine that makes her sleep late into the morning, and she's already aware of the fact that Eddie's going to Bill's early, so she won't freak out too much when she wakes up and he's not there.

Eddie wears one of his favorite sweatshirts, a soft blue one that he's almost started to grow out of. He also brings an extra one for Richie, even though it's going to be short on his arms by a good few inches.

When he gets to the Barrens, Richie's already waiting for him. Mist curls off of the creek, and the early morning sun cuts through it in rays that alight on the still green leaves of the trees surrounding their clubhouse.

Richie seems a bit eager to put on the sweatshirt that Eddie brought for him, even though he'd dressed himself that morning and still gone with shorts and a t shirt. When Eddie points this out, Richie rolls his eyes and waggles his fingers at Eddie, saying "It's *summer*, Eds. I'm not wearing warm clothes in *summer*."

"You're wearing warm clothes now," Eddie points out, pretending that he didn't bring a red sweatshirt because he thinks that Richie looks nice in red.

"That's different," Richie says decidedly. "It's yours."

And Eddie can't deny that he's right, so they they both climb into the hammock, but side by side this time, so their shoulders press together and their legs dangle out over the side.

"Are you gonna be bored?" Richie asks, pulling out his Gameboy, and pushes his glasses up. "We can do something else."

"Nah," Eddie says, leaning his head on Richie's shoulder. "As long as you let me play, in a bit, I don't mind watching."

Richie presses his lips together tight, and then, so quickly that is almost hurts, turns his head to kiss the top of Eddie's head, before scrunching back down in the hammock so that his shoulders are around his flaming ears, starting up his Gameboy.

"You're such a loser," Eddie says, face red too, and the he burrows even closer into Richie's side, resting his chin on his shoulder, as the world around them starts to wake up. For now, though, it's just the two of them, warm next to each other in the cold morning air.

Author's Note:

12,000 words have never come easier to me, I swear.
I wrote this in like three days because i am In It.

The title and the Wham! song playing from Bev's radio is Nothing Looks the Same In the Light, which yeah is pretty Adult and not necessarily relevant to the content of this fic, but the title sounds like it could be lol.

Let me know what you think!